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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000335

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PREF UNSC WI MO AG
SUBJECT: NEW POLISARIO LEADERSHIP DEFIANT, SAHRAWIS
DISILLUSIONED

REF: A. ALGIERS 21

1B. ALGIERS 199
1C. ALGIERS 294

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a March 12-14 visit to Tindouf by Emboff and visiting PRM officers, Polisario leaders expressed increasing frustration with the Manhasset negotiation process, consistent with recent public statements by Polisario officials in Algiers. Although the Polisario leadership was vague as to how it intends to act on its frustration, it implied that its future actions will be more aggressive and will seek to invoke more direct third-party intervention in the conflict. Its relations with MINURSO, meanwhile, appeared strained. The refugee population in general seemed to be well informed concerning Polisario activities and supportive of the new political leadership elected during the December Tifariti conference (ref A). Humanitarian assistance to the refugees, particularly food aid, has been complicated by the inability of the UN or its implementing partners to conduct a census in the refugee camps. END SUMMARY.

NEW POLISARIO LEADERSHIP DEFIANT

12. (C) Emboff and visiting officers from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration visited the Sahrawi refugee camps in and around Tindouf, in southwestern Algeria, from March 12-14. During their visit, Polisario Prime Minister Abdelkader Taleb Omar, after recounting a long history of the Sahrawi people, stated that the Polisario expected nothing to come out of the Manhasset talks. He said the Polisario had been "patient" for the last 16 years, adding cryptically that they would "take the necessary steps." He said that if the UN or a third party did not step in after the "failed" negotiations in Manhasset, "tension" would return. Though careful to avoid any direct mention of a return to armed conflict, Taleb Omar made it clear that the Polisario was considering other means to achieve its political objectives. Taleb Omar, who was reelected for a second term as prime minister at the December congress in Tifariti, has a reputation for being well spoken and choosing his words carefully. He appealed for a more direct U.S. role in the negotiations and referred to the now-defunct Baker Plan as "close to acceptable."

13. (C) Khadija Hamdi, newly elected minister of culture and wife of Polisario President Mohamed Abdelaziz, told us that her mandate was to create a platform for the "country" of Western Sahara. She indicated that there was some unrest among the younger refugees. According to the Hamdi, "the Sahraoui people have two choices: remain refugees or prepare for independence," and she chose the latter. Hamdi urged the U.S. to recognize the Western Sahara because "it would be a stable country and would be a friend of the United States." She concluded her political discourse with an appeal for U.S. help to pressure Morocco to accept the Polisario position on a referendum.

STRAINED RELATIONS WITH MINURSO

14. (C) We met with the civilian head and military observer force commander of MINURSO, which maintains a liaison office in Tindouf. MINURSO's primary mission in Tindouf consists of liaison activities with the Polisario Front. MINURSO personnel complained that relations with the Polisario were strained and that MINURSO had virtually no access to the refugee camps. As such, we were told, MINURSO is unable to assess the capacity of the Sahrawi military within the camps in Algeria. Note: UNHCR personnel confirmed that the relations between MINURSO and the Polisario had been strained and one UNHCR official attributed it to inappropriate behavior on the part of military observer personnel. End Note.) The MINURSO civilian chief indicated that the December Polisario congress in Tifariti included much talk of returning to armed struggle. According to MINURSO, Morocco has shown decreasing patience for Polisario activities in the "liberated" zone east of the berm, such as the congress in

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Tifariti and other activities, though they remain well outside the exclusion zone prescribed under the ceasefire agreement. (Comment: The Polisario appeared frustrated with the UN in general and seemed to see MINURSO as ineffective in its mission to carry out a referendum. The tense relations between MINURSO and the Polisario may be a result of political disagreements rather than actions by the military observers. End Comment.)

REFUGEES RESILIENT, DETERMINED

15. (C) Polisario Minister of Cooperation Salek Baba Hassena told us that the Sahrawi people "depend entirely on the international community." His job to coordinate the provision of international aid to the refugee camps is clearly a powerful one within the Polisario leadership since he has considerable influence over the distribution of food as well as the allocation of nonfood resources such as funding for water and education projects in the camps. Unlike the other Polisario officials, Hassena did not deliver the standard Polisario political speech.

16. (C) The Sahrawi refugees reside in five camps spread across a fairly wide swath of desolate Saharan landscape. Despite the rather harsh desert environment, most refugees appear to be in relatively good health and most benefit from technology such as satellite television and solar power. Many have their own vehicles (mainly old Land Rovers). Most refugees appear to be well connected to the outside world via satellite TV and radio and are well informed concerning Polisario activities. Several families we spoke to knew the dates of the Manhasset negotiations, and many watch the news on al-Jazeera. Many families said they have sons in the military and all families we encountered stated that they received food aid from the WFP. During our visit to Tindouf, the WFP finalized an agreement with the Algerian government to distribute food rations to 125,000 refugees. WFP pointed out, however, that the number did not represent the actual number of refugees in need of food aid since the UN has not

been permitted to conduct a census.

WHERE IS EVERYBODY?

¶7. (C) During a visit to the public market in Tindouf, we saw unopened bags of WFP flour, containers of vegetable oil and high-energy biscuits for sale. Though the refugees admitted to selling small quantities of their food basket in order to purchase other necessary commodities, the amount and variety of WFP food stuffs available in the market suggested that there are problems with the food distribution system. The refugee camps did not appear to be fully populated and members of the delegation observed many empty tents and huts.

When asked about the empty dwellings, the refugees gave vague and unconvincing responses about the whereabouts of the supposed occupants. A common line from both Polisario officials and refugees was that life is difficult but the struggle for recognition and cultural identity give people strength to carry on. Almost all conversations included the phrase: "Until we go back to our country." We asked one refugee family what they would do if the negotiations with Morocco failed. Without hesitation, the parents and the older children said they would go to war in order to reclaim their "country." Though such overt bellicose rhetoric was rare during the visit, nearly all the refugees we spoke to indicated a strong desire to change tactics considering what they appeared to believe was the almost certain failure of the UN-sponsored negotiations.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The Polisario leadership and refugees we spoke to have lost much confidence that the UN and the negotiation process will address their concerns. While the level of their rhetoric has increased and talk of a return to armed struggle is now frequent, no specific war plans are apparent, though Sahrawi frustration is palpable. In a press conference on March 17 in Algiers, Poliario Foreign Minister Salek Ould-Salek, unhappy with both the UN and Morocco, told the press that the "situation is dire and could explode at any

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moment." Meanwhile, the Sahrawi refugees go about their daily lives in the Algerian Sahara, completely dependent upon the international community for assistance.

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